

Shell rings of the southeast US

M. RUSSO & G. HEIDE*

Shell rings are circular and semi-circular deposits of shell (mostly oyster, *Crassostrea virginica*), faunal bone, artefacts and soil constructed along the Florida, Georgia and South Carolina coasts of the southeastern United States.

Rings in Georgia and South Carolina date to c. 4200–3200 BP and range in size from 1 to 3 m tall and 22 to 83 m across. These little-studied sites have been suggested to be the remains of gaming arenas, astronomical observatories, torture chambers, houses of state, and fish traps. Most archaeologists view the sites as the subsistence remains of egalitarian hunter/fisher encampments. The rings' generally symmetrical, circular shapes are seen as reflective of the equal status among their societal members wherein no individual or family held a unique or favoured position over another. The general absence of exotic or prestige artefacts, elaborate burials and ceremonial mounds has reinforced the concept that these Late Archaic shell rings reflect rudimentary hunter/fisher cultures. Ironically, shell rings have also been cited as the earliest evidence for the rise of hierarchical social development in North America (Russo 1991; Russo & Saunders 1999). Shell rings have yielded evidence of the earliest permanent year-round occupations, the earliest development of pottery and the earliest examples of large-scale monumental architecture. Consequentially the function of shell rings remains an open question.

Recent work at six sites has shown that shell rings in Florida are as tall (1–4 m), but larger (150–250 m across) and more structurally complex than those found in Georgia and South Carolina. At 4600 BP Oxeye is the oldest. It lies half-buried beneath a salt marsh and pre-dates the local invention of pottery by at least 100 years. Located high and dry on a nearby barrier island, Rollins shell ring dates to 3700 BP and is unusual in that numerous smaller 'ringlets' are attached to its main ring. Twenty miles south, and of the same orientation and approximate size as Rollins, lies the Guana ring. It also dates to c. 3700 BP. The Joseph Reed ring, which has been diminished by

coastal erosion, is the youngest ring at 3300 BP. Finally, on the southwest Florida coast, two aceramic, U-shaped rings, Bonita Bay (4100 BP) and Horr's Island (4400 BP) are unique in that they are associated with ceremonial mounds.

Unlike some of the Georgia and South Carolina rings, none of the Florida rings represent a complete or closed circle. To determine the degree and character of hierarchy in the societies that constructed these rings, our current research applies Grøn's (1991) spatial model, which posits that high- and low-status societal members occupied different but specific positions in circular and semicircular settlements. We believe that the mounding of shell at these rings may have functioned as a display of status. By linking the volume of shell and differing amounts and kinds of artefacts to predicted positions of status within the ring, we hope to identify the level and character of social complexity among shell-ring builders.

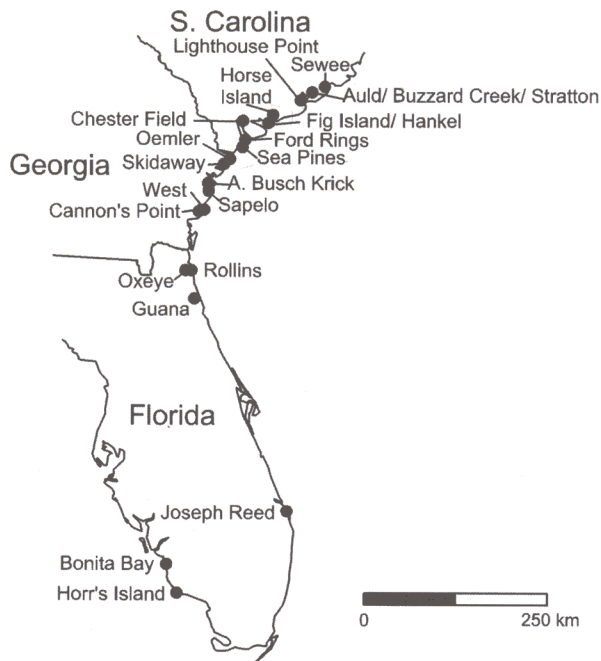


FIGURE 1. Shell ring locations.

* SEAC, 2035 E. Paul Dirac, Tallahassee FL 32310, USA. mike_russo@nps.gov greg_heide@nps.gov